

MRS. STELLERY'S LETTERS

Astro in the Rôle of Family Peacemaker

BY ALAN BRAGHAMPTON

Drawings by George Brehm

YOUR wife must be a beautiful woman, Mr. Stellery," said Astro. Stellery looked a little embarrassed. He pulled his blond mustache thoughtfully. "Why—ah—yes; I used to think so, when I first married her. One gets used to a face, you know."

"I see. Still, she must be charming. At least, her anonymous correspondent seems to think so. He is certainly very complimentary. See here," the Seer picked up one of the letters from the bunch on the table, opened it, and read aloud:

"It may sound banal to say you're pretty, and yet every woman likes to know that she is. You're far more; you have an original type of beauty. One watches for your smile, hoping it will come soon. And that constellation of dimples in your cheeks!"

Stellery laughed faintly. "Just about the way I used to talk," he acknowledged. "When I first courted her I was quite poetical about those dimples,—named everyone after a different star, I believe. Queer this chap has picked up the same idea, though."

It was on Astro's lips to say that the simile was as old as woman's love and man's, but he did not. He turned to another letter, typewritten like the other.

"You're like a little gray mouse. I wonder if there is any lurking devil in you for me to evoke? With your gray eyes you look so demure! Are you really as quiet as you seem? I'd like to have a talk with you alone and see!"

"She has a devil in her, all right," remarked Stellery, "and a delicious enough one, too! Oh, she can be charming, that mouse! It's very evident that the fellow who's writing these letters doesn't know her very well. That's one satisfaction."

Astro took up one more.

"I saw you at the opera last night. You had more style, more apparent culture, more caste, than any woman in the house. Once you looked full at me, and I wondered what it would seem like to have a wife like you. To own you, and be owned by so wonderful a creature! How proud I'd be!"

"I remember that night. Mrs. Stellery does look well when she's dressed up. But curse such audacity! Writing to my wife like that! It's an outrage, by Jove! You'll see why I don't care to go to the police with these letters. But they must be stopped, and I must find out who's doing it!"

"How long has this thing been going on?"

"For two months, now. I have a bunch more of 'em at home that my wife gave me."

The letters on the table were all written on telegraph blanks and inclosed in Government stamped envelopes.

"All typewritten like these?"

"No; the first ones were crudely printed in pencil, as if a child had done them."

"And all of them complimentary?"

"Everyone of them."

"How often do they come?"

"Every two or three days. Mrs. Stellery has been away visiting in Philadelphia the last three weeks, and they followed her down there. She brought back a whole lot of them to show to me."

"Did she show you the first one when it came?"

"No, not for sometime; not till she had received several, in fact. At first she didn't want to worry me, she said; then she decided that I ought to know about them, anyway. Some of the first ones were left in the letterbox, but most of them have been sent through the mails."

"Does Mrs. Stellery seem to be much worried at receiving them?"

"Decidedly. Of course, it isn't as if they were as unpleasant as anonymous letters sometimes are. But she didn't want me to go to you about it, and thought that they'd stop coming after awhile. In point of fact, she hasn't had any this week, but I want to find out who's responsible for them; and, from what I've heard of you, you're the one to do it."

"I see." Astro let his chin fall into his palms and stared at the table in silence for sometime.

STELLERY walked up and down, examining the furnishings of the studio. He picked up a gold stiletto and fingered it, walked to the wall and looked at an antique bit of tapestry, smiled at Astro's white lizard in its cage, and returned to the Seer, who looked up to say:



"It's queer that a man who professes to admire her so much doesn't have the courage to tell her so, isn't it?" He watched Stellery between half-closed lids.

"You don't know her. My wife is a very proud woman. She'd not stand for it a minute, I'm sure of that. This chap has some romantic notion, or he wants to make trouble. It seems to me the letters are a bit too literary in style, as if he was used to composition. And what he says is true, too! How does he know my wife has dimples in her shoulders, by Jove? How does he know how she looks in an Egyptian scarf? She hasn't worn one since her honeymoon when I got one

in Cairo. Why, I might have written those letters myself! Little, intimate details that make my blood boil to think of another man's knowing! Little tricks she has I didn't think anyone else had ever noticed! It's amazing!"

"Are you home much of the time?" Astro asked, stacking the letters into a pile on the table.

"Not much; that is, until lately. I'm a busy man, and when I'm at home I try to get rid of some of my outside work. I have a den down next to my library, and often spend the whole evening there. I've been trying to get together a lot of information on the history of Wall Street coups, and it takes about all my spare time. All the relaxation I get, really, is in bridge at the Percentage Club. Why?" He stopped and darted a look at Astro.

"Oh, I only wondered how much time your wife had to herself."

Stellery wheeled on him. "See here! I hope that's no insinuation! My wife is above suspicion, you understand that! Good Lord! why should she show me these letters, if she wasn't?"

"Oh, my dear sir," said Astro suavely, "don't take it that way! I was wondering if anyone was watching her, following her. Nevertheless, I should

like to know, also, just whom she sees, and where, and how. You have given me a difficult task, Mr. Stellery, and you must forgive me if I seem curious. But I presume I shall get it all better in my own way. You don't mind my calling on Mrs. Stellery, I imagine?"

"Why, of course not. She'll be glad to see you, I suppose. You know what I mean—Of course it's a delicate matter, and she's naturally sensitive."

"Very good." Astro rose, tall and handsome. A veil seemed to be drawn before his eyes, masking all expression; as if, having learned all he could of his client, he was anxious to be alone to solve the problem.

Stellery seemed to feel the change of atmosphere. He reached for his hat, shook hands, and left the studio.

HOW do you diagnose him, Valeska?" Astro asked his assistant, who had overheard the talk.

"A clever man, absorbed in business, a bit cruel, or at least inclined to be cold and unsympathetic, and yet honorable and loyal at heart. I'd hate to be in love with him! He'd make me suffer. And you?"

Astro smiled cryptically. "You work from your feelings; I from my facts," he said. "Fortunately, we often come out in the same place. But, speaking of facts, try and see what you can make of these letters. It's an amusing complication, and a new variation of the anonymous letter."

Valeska sat down and looked over the pile. As she examined them one by one and threw them into a heap to begin over again, she kept up a running commentary. "Mostly stamped at the Madison Square branch postoffice. A few at Station E—that's on West 32d-st. isn't it? One or two at Times Square branch, and one at Station I, 105th-st. All but that one mailed in the early afternoon. Written on a Remington typewriter; a pretty old one, I should say, for the alignment is bad. All the small O's register below the line, and all the capital N's above it.

And I should say that the writer is not in love with her, only pretending."

"How do you make that out?" Astro smiled curiously.

"I can feel it."

"Too literary?"

"Oh, I can't explain it. Only, I know if I got letters like this I'd throw them in the fire. Your gracile hands!—bosh!"

"Yes, I noticed 'gracile.' It seems to be his pet word. Also 'jimp.' Queer love letters—I agree with you."

"Love letters! They're deeper than that!"

"You're right, and there is small possibility of finding the author unless we discover the motive first. There are thousands of persons who might write these letters. What I have to decide is, Why should anyone of them do it? It may be a mere practical joke. If that's so, it would be done by some one who can watch the effect upon her. In any case, I take it that it must be some one who knows her. What good could it do a stranger?"

"What good could it do a friend or an acquaintance?"

"Flatter a woman with all sorts of intimate, original compliments,—not spoken, so that she would have to blush, deny, and reprove; but written, so that she could read and reread them in secret as often as she liked,—arouse her curiosity, a powerful ally; her sense of the romantic, a still stronger one; and finally unmask yourself as the adorer:—I don't know that it's so bad a way, after all."

"Unless you try it on a woman who shows all the letters to her husband," said Valeska dryly.

"Yes; but how's he to



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know she will? He's probably conceited enough to think she won't.

"There's one other way of discovering the writer,—find a Remington typewriter with an alignment imperfect in just this way."

"Yes," said Astro. "We might begin and fine-tooth-comb the city for it. Still, accidents do happen, luckily for prophets and seers. And, at any rate, that will be the final proof. Well, I'm going to reread the whole bunch, look for some unifying theory—and then call on the lady. I confess I'm curious to see her."

MRS. STELLERY, he was to find, was a woman of by no means an obvious type. Outwardly, it is true, she manifested social grace and experience, was handsome rather than beautiful, with a dark, serious face and finely chiseled features. One would call her aristocratic in looks and manner, and yet, behind the conventional aspects in which she showed herself in company, a keen observer would note subtlety after subtlety. That she had a fine mind, and a fearless one, was occasionally proved by the flashes of wit and perspicacity that illumined her conversation and colored what might otherwise be a rather bored, repressed, though perfectly polite habit of talk. She seemed aloof, waiting for something interesting, all but effete. Her smile was elusive; but, when it came forth, compelling, captivating, and as soon as it had created that impression, it faded and the weary manner asserted itself again. Only the mouth was temperamental. The gray eyes were well schooled, though velvety soft. She had a trick of half raising one eyebrow, which gave a whimsical relief to her haughty pose. One could fancy her always playing a part and wonder what the real woman would be like. Not very different from other women, after all, if one judged by the quivering lips.

This, at least, is the way Astro described the woman to Valeska later. He was waiting in the reception room, looking at a novel entitled "The Guerdon," when Mrs. Stellery entered, one brow delicately arched, as if she had not been quite sure whom she was to find.

He introduced himself, and for a moment she seemed embarrassed and turned the conversation to the novel.

"Have you read it?" she asked. "I met the author, Mr. Askerson, lately in Philadelphia at a dinner, and he sent me the book. I met him only twice; but he seemed quite an extraordinary man."

Astro turned to the title page, and before finding it noticed the inscription on the flyleaf. "Mrs. Viola Stellery Her Book," a quaint enough wording to arouse his smile. "A problem?" he asked.

"Love after marriage, the modern theme," she replied.

"I'd like to know his solution."

She only smiled. It was her only smile during the interview, and the talk passed to the letters.

She had no idea, she said, why she was being so persecuted. They were stupid, and apparently meaningless, yet they annoyed her. Their audacity had now begun to worry her, as well. If anything could be done to stop them, she would be glad. Yes, they had stopped, for the time being, and perhaps it would be as well to wait and do nothing; but now Stellery himself was aroused and wished the matter investigated. He was too busy with his press of work to spend much time on the matter. He was a very busy man. Quite absorbed in his work—and she had hoped to go abroad with him in the spring. At present it seemed impossible. And so on the talk ran, and her expression said, "What are you going to do about it? I don't care!"

THEN a card was brought in, and she said, "It is Dr. Primfield, my husband's brother in law, you know. Married Paul's sister, who died two years ago. He's a physician. We see a good deal of him."

She did not add, "and he bores me," but the merest drag in her words implied it. In another minute the doctor came brusquely in.

He was a nervous, slim, snapping eyed man of thirty-five, with a jerky way of speaking and moving. He said, "Hello, Lila!" shook hands, bowed to Astro, and looked at him with a professional eye, seemed to decide that the palmist was all right, flapped himself into a seat, screwed his feet round the legs of a chair, and began to talk very fast to his hostess, ignoring Astro.

Mrs. Stellery endeavored to include both guests in the conversation; but found it difficult. Astro, seeing that he was in the way, at least of the doctor, withdrew and went back to the studio.

On the way he stopped at a bookstore and bought a copy of "The Guerdon." Dipping into it, walking down Fifth-ave., he came across a sentence, reread it, shut the book with a snap, and walked home thinking.

Arrived at the studio, he laid the book open at the page he had read, before Valeska.

"She laid her soft, gracile hands, palms down, on the table," she read aloud, and looked up. "Did you find 'jimp' too?"

"You'll have to read the book and see," was his answer. And then he described the interview. "If you find 'jimp' and 'nuance'—for there are three 'nuances' in the letters—I think it would be well for you to apply to Askerson for a position as secretary. Only on the chance, a slim enough one,—but all we have at present. But Stellery is right; the letters do sound literary. If I could only think of a motive for a man like Askerson doing such a sentimental thing!"

"He might want to see what she'll do, and use the episode in fiction."

"Yes, that's the trouble. Men have many motives, and often several at a time, really mixed. Women seldom act except with a single definite motive, no matter how they conceal it or even pretend to themselves that



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it's different. Then, there's Dr. Primfield

"Why Dr. Primfield more than another?" Astro laughed. "There doesn't seem to be any other, yet, perhaps because I have inveterate faith in my luck, but more from the way he looked at her."

"How did he look at her?"

"This way."

But Valeska, seeing too well what was in his eyes, turned away her own. "Well, I'll read the book," she remarked, leaving

"And I'll read the letters again."

THERE were, Valeska found, three "graciles," one "jimp," and two "nuances" in Askerson's novel. In connection with their recurrence in the letters, the coincidence might mean anything or nothing. What was more important was to get a sample of Askerson's typewriting; and to this end Valeska, in the guise of a stenographer in search of work, visited him.

She found Askerson to be the farthest removed from her preconceived idea of a novelist. He was a short, round, and chubby seraphic looking young man, with light curly hair and the mien of a preternaturally solemn child. His earnestness seemed absurd masquerading in this juvenility guise; but, once that inconsistency was forgotten, under the spell of his mental power, she found him a most interesting man. He was in the midst of his work, dressed in a pink silk shirt and white duck trousers, his hair a mass of light wavy locks over his eyes, smoking a briar pipe.

He assured her that though he would like to employ a secretary, he could not afford it. Besides, he was engaged in dramatizing "The Guerdon," and had to work it out himself on his machine, inch by inch. He had to refuse her request, but seemed willing to talk.

Valeska had prepared for the interview by reading everything of Askerson's that she could find. Among other books, she had discovered a slim book of poems, privately printed during his college days. As a last resort, she used this, hoping to play upon the vanity of the poet in him.

"I heard a girl once recite one of your poems: 'Sea Magic' I think it was called. Do you know where I could get a copy of it?"

He seemed pleased. "I didn't know anyone remembered that verse," he said. "It's one of my favorites. If you'll wait, I'll see if I can remember it. I'll typewrite it for you, if you like." He sat down to his machine, puckered his brows, and began to write. He paused once in a while in search of a phrase, which he usually found by a hard glare at the ceiling, and finally finished it and presented her with the sheet.

"Will you mind signing it?" she asked timidly.

He put his name and a flourish at the bottom of the page.

She could scarcely wait till she was in the car to examine the printing. The small O's registered a little below the lines, but the capital N's were true.

Astro shrugged his shoulders when he saw it, and pointed silently with the stem of his cigarette to the word "gracile" in the last stanza.

TWO days after that, a hasty summons came from Stellery over the telephone, at four in the afternoon. He wished Astro to come immediately to the house; but did not care to tell, over the wire, why he was needed.

Astro took a taxicab and went up town immediately. He found the broker in his den, writing at a big table covered with sheets of paper. On a smaller table stood his typewriter, a sheet, half written, sticking from the roller.

Stellery looked up with a worried expression. "Take a seat," he said. "I want your advice; or, rather, your help. Things have come to a crisis. Brush those papers on the floor anywhere."

As Astro sat down he noticed a waste paper basket behind him, a little to the left. As he seated himself, he pushed his chair back a foot or so, so that the basket was within easy reach. Stellery took a letter from his pocket and passed it over. "Here's what came yesterday," he said.

Astro opened it and read.

"I simply can't wait any longer! I must see you! You must know, by this time, how madly I am in love with you. I don't dare speak to you face to face, unless I receive some encouragement. But I want to end this suspense immediately and know my fate! Will you meet me to-morrow afternoon, at six o'clock, at the prescription counter of the Times Square drug store? If you'll be there and will let me speak to you for only five minutes, please leave a candle lighted in the window of your room to-night between ten and eleven o'clock."

"Well, did she light the signal?" said Astro, handing back the letter.

Stellery frowned and nodded. "See here, you can imagine how I must feel to have this sort of thing going on!" he said. "And it's enough to make me fairly sick! But I want to trap that man and find out who he is. That's why I sent for you. Mrs. Stellery objected very strongly to lending herself to the scheme in any way. It was all I could do to get her to light the candle, in fact, I had to do that myself. But, after talking it over, and deciding that there was after all no real danger of her compromising herself, she consented to be at the rendezvous this evening at six o'clock. She doesn't seem to be curious,—the thing disgusts her,—but she wants to put an end to the matter. Of course I can't be seen there, or he'd never appear at all. That's what makes me wild. I'd like to go down and punch that chap's head! Instead, I've got to stay here and wait. I want you to follow her down—nobody will know you have anything to do with it, of course—and find out who it is, if it's some one she doesn't know. Then we'll put that chap in jail, if it's a possible thing!"

He had worked himself into a passion as he

talked, and, rising and gesticulating, walked back and forth in the little room.

ASTRO watched his chance, and, when Stellery's back was turned, reached into the waste paper basket, drew out a sheet of typewritten paper, crumpled it up in his hand, and slid it into his pocket.

"Is Mrs. Stellery at home?" he asked.

"No; she had an appointment this afternoon. But she'll be at the drug store at six, she promised."

"I wish I had known this before," said Astro. "I should have liked to have my assistant with me."

"I've been trying to get you on the 'phone all day. But, in point of fact, though Mrs. Stellery consented to the candle, I had to argue with her all this morning to get her to meet this man. You can imagine how I feel! I wonder if I've done wrong? Can you fancy how it feels to send your wife to a rendezvous to meet an anonymous correspondent? By Jove! I didn't know how much I loved her, before! You know, I've neglected her shamefully, I suppose. I've been absorbed in my work, and that's why this sort of thing has been possible. I suppose people have seen her going about alone, and have thought perhaps we were estranged, even. And everything this damned scoundrel has been writing her is true, by Jove! She is charming, you can see that! She's one of ten thousand, that woman! I ought to know. Now, at the faintest prospect of losing her, absurd as that chance is—why, I'm fairly crazy about her. If I saw that man with her, I don't care who he is, I believe I'd kill him!"

"Which is another reason for your not going," said Astro, rising. "There must be no scene. You can trust Mrs. Stellery to make the talk brief and forcible enough, and, in any case, you may depend upon me to protect her."

IT was nearly a quarter to six before he reached Times Square. He entered the building and started down stairs toward the subway entrance on his way to the drug store below the street, when a man brushed past him, almost jostling him off the step in his haste. The man looked round to apologize: it was Dr. Primfield.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" he said, and looked at Astro queerly. "Haven't I met you somewhere?" he added.

Astro recalled the meeting; but did not mention his own name.

The doctor appeared to be a little embarrassed. "I've got to catch a subway train: so you'll have to excuse me," he said. "Otherwise, I'd like to have a talk. I have some theories of my own about capillary markings on the fingers I'd like to discuss with you. Good day!" and he was off like a busy squirrel. As he passed the drug store entrance Astro noticed that he gave a swift, apparently uneasy look inside.

Mrs. Stellery, however, had not yet appeared; but at a few minutes before six she walked in the door, handed a prescription to the clerk at the desk, and seated herself without appearing to recognize the Seer, who lounged at a counter some distance away. She was beautifully dressed in the prevalent mode, and sat like a fashion plate, without expression on her proud face as if bored to death.

Six o'clock struck, and no one approached her. Fifteen minutes went by, and still she sat, calm and haughty, in her place. Finally, when the prescription was handed her, she walked over to Astro and bowed coldly.

"Do you think it will be any use waiting longer?" she asked.

"Not the slightest," was his reply. "No one will come. I am quite sure."

She looked up at him with a sudden, keen expression. "You are sure?" she repeated.

"Quite so, Mrs. Stellery. May I escort you home?"

When they arrived, the servant who opened the door put a note into Mrs. Stellery's hand, saying that it had been delivered by a messenger boy. She tore it open, read it, and passed it to Astro.

"It was of course impossible for me to speak to you, as you were watched."

THE next day, as Astro and Valeska were driving up town, returning from a case that was then puzzling him, he proposed that they rest at Sherry's and take tea there. It was not yet four o'clock, and there was no one else in the room when they entered. Tea, muffins, and jam had hardly been ordered, however, when Valeska suddenly exclaimed:

"Why, there's Mr. Askerson now!"

"And there's Mrs. Stellery as well!" Astro added.

Master and assistant gave each other a quick glance, then turned to the approaching couple. They were earnestly conversing, and did not, apparently, notice that there was anyone else in the room as they walked across to the opposite side and sat down. Then Mrs. Stellery cast her gray eyes slowly about the room and met Astro's. He and Valeska could see the color mantle her cheeks as she turned away. Askerson was slower at perceiving who was present; but when at last he noticed Valeska, he turned suddenly and said something to Mrs. Stellery. The latter was too well bred to turn; perhaps she was too busy in attempting to mask her thoughts in her haughty, cold expression. They did not look over again.

"Well, if Mr. Askerson has written those letters, it's about time for him to explain now," said Valeska. "I think he's a dear! But why should he take such an elaborate method of making love to her when he can meet her like this whenever he wants to?"

"Perhaps he can't."

"There's no reason why he shouldn't, is there? It's all right."

"Do you think he wrote them?"

"I don't know. If it hadn't been for your

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meeting Dr. Primfield, I'd be surer. His typewriter leaves it in doubt."

"Oh, the typewriter, we agreed, was only the final test. What you must seek is a motive."

"Well, then, Askerson is romantic—and a bit afraid of her. Dr. Primfield is practical; but afraid of her husband. Either may be in love with her."

"I don't think you have proved a sufficient motive yet for so extraordinary a course. But, by Jove! look at that! If there isn't Primfield himself!"

It was Primfield, indeed, who entered at that moment, looked about, caught sight of Mrs. Stellery, walked over to her table, and spoke. She reached out her hand and smiled faintly. There were a few words of introduction, and he sat down at their table and lighted a cigarette.

"Now," said Astro, "you have a chance to vindicate your woman's perception. Watch and see which of those two men is in love with her."

Valeska narrowed her eyes and watched. It was five minutes before she said deliberately, "I think neither of them is."

Astro laughed softly. "Well, my dear, I have a better motive than you have yet discovered."

"What is it?" she asked eagerly.

"I won't tell you yet; I'll give you a chance to think it over by yourself. But at ten o'clock to-morrow morning the writer of the Stellery anonymous letters will walk into my studio."

At ten next morning Valeska came swiftly into the laboratory where Astro was experimenting with phosphorescent sulphid of calcium screens. The sight of her face made the Seer smile, it was so puzzled in its expression.

"Mrs. Stellery is here. She says you wished to see her. Are you going to have her meet the author of the letters?"

"Yes," he answered, putting down a varnish brush. "And if you want enlightenment on human nature, I advise you to listen in the anteroom."

He took a piece of crumpled paper covered with typewriting from his pocket and handed it to her. She looked at it carefully; then, as she stood for a moment staring at him, her face changed.

"Oh!" she breathed, and walked rapidly back to the reception room.

Mrs. Stellery was waiting for him, standing beside the granite Thoth in the center of the studio. Her eyes were fixed blankly; but at his coming she turned a white face suddenly to him.

"You said that you had discovered the authorship of the letters," she said, and her voice was very low. "I'm anxious about it. Do you really know? Are you sure?"

He nodded gravely, motioned her to a seat, and sat down himself. "My dear Mrs. Stellery," he began, "I want you to trust implicitly in my tact and my consideration. I shall do nothing whatever without your consent, you may be sure. Indeed, it was to ask your advice that I sent for you."

She continued staring at him anxiously, and her lips formed the words, "My husband!"

"Mr. Stellery shall know—only what you please to tell him yourself," he answered.

"Then you do know!" Her lips were trembling.

"It was my business to find out."

"Who wrote them, then?" she demanded almost fiercely, as if defying him.

"Mrs. Stellery," he replied, "you are a clever woman. Not only that, but you have a profound knowledge of men. And you have a heart that, in its danger, knows how to ally itself with your brain."

"You mean—"

"That you wrote them yourself!"

For a few minutes no one would have recognized her for the proud, serene woman of the world. A strong effort of her will brought her back to something like composure; but now she must talk.

"If you knew what I have suffered!" she exclaimed. "We have been growing away from each other for a year. If it had been only a quarrel, we might have made it up; but this was only his carelessness, his absorption in his business, his thoughtless cruelty. I wanted to arouse him, rekindle his interest in me, make him love me again, if I could. Oh! can't you see? It may not have been right,—it was a deceit, I know,—but I missed him so!"

"My dear Mrs. Stellery, you needn't justify yourself to me. All I need to say is that I'm sure your ruse has worked."

"Oh, I know it has! But I had some good advice,—it wasn't all sheer woman's wit,—Mr. Askerson helped me. I don't know how I came to confide in him,—I've seen him so few times,—but he wrote most of the letters for me, and I copied them, so they would seem more like a man's letters, you know. But I confess—I don't know what you'll think of my praising myself so—all those intimate personal things were truly my own. Most of them my husband had said to me during our honeymoon. I thought they would be most likely to arouse his jealousy."

"Oh, he's jealous enough," said Astro. "You needn't fear that you haven't succeeded. He has threatened to kill the writer of the letters."

She smiled wistfully. "Well, I hope he won't kill me when he finds out I'm the one. And that's the question! I always expected to tell him; but now I'm afraid to. I didn't quite intend to let it go so far, and I don't know how to explain. What shall I do?" She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. There was no haughtiness left, now.

"I think you needn't worry," said Astro, giving her his hand in sympathy. "For I met Mr. Stellery this morning on his way to the office. He told me that he intended to take you abroad immediately. That he said would stop this nonsense and give him a chance to get acquainted with you all over again. He said he was sure you had been left alone too much."

"Really?" she said, suddenly smiling. "Oh, then, I'm sure the letters will stop! And," she added softly, "when I've quite won him back, and we're happy again, I'll confess everything." She paused a moment, then spoke as if to herself. "There's a little canal in Venice I love. It's called the Rio Margherita. I think it will be there—in June—just after sunset."

The next Seer of Secrets story, "Black Light," the last and one of the best of the series, will appear June 20.

A GENTLE KNIGHT OF OLD BRANDENBURG

Continued from page 11

the King returns from The Tabagie and does not find me at home, he might burst a blood vessel and that would be a pity."

Soon after they left Ritter's Henry noticed a man following them, and called Fritz's attention to him.

"He is probably a spy of Grumkow's," said little Fritz; "but, as we have done no mischief, he will have his trouble for his reward."

"Our only mischief has been our music," said Henry, laughing. "Perhaps the King would not consider it mischief."

"No," returned Fritz. "He wishes me to associate with the burgher families. His aversion to music is confined to my music, and is only a vent for his hatred of me."

"The King does not hate you," said Henry protesting.

"Indeed he does," returned the Crown Prince emphatically; "and I fully realize that my life is in hourly danger from his violence. I am also in danger of assassination at Grumkow's hands. I wish I could believe that it was not true; but Grumkow will get rid of me one of these fine days, and the King will give my poor dear sister to Schwedt. Uneasy lies the head that expects to wear the crown."

"The Margrave of Schwedt will not marry the Princess against her will," said Henry.

Fritz, looking up in quick surprise, answered, "Mina will have no will in the matter. Schwedt will not know her wishes; but should he know of her antipathy and should he refuse to marry her, the marriage will take place anyway, with or without the consent of either my sister or Adolph. Why do you believe that Schwedt will not marry my sister against her will?"

"He told me he would not," answered Fritz Henry.

"Poor, foolish Adolph! He will do whatever my father commands, and the King will do whatever Grumkow wills. Adolph has been madly in love with Mina since he first saw her two years ago, and my sister and I both feel very sorry for the poor, simple, harmless fellow."

"She seems to treat him kindly," said Henry.

to fill up the pause and to lead the Prince on.

"Of course she does," returned Prince Fritz. "Mina treats everyone kindly. She is gentle and forgiving even with Grumkow, her arch enemy. My sister is the most beautiful character in the world, and without her I should not want to live another day. She is the one bright spot in my miserable life. I want you to know her better; but you must not misconstrue her kindness and fall in love with her, as every man has done who has come near her since she was a child. We will take her to Ritter's when next we go, and you shall walk with her. That, I wish to tell you, is the greatest favor I can confer on you."

"It would be a great pleasure to me, and I should value the honor if I felt sure that your father would not object. I hear he is very strict with the Princess," answered Henry.

"You had better say cruel to her. That would be nearer the truth, and that is the great pain of my life. I could suffer all his cruelties without flinching; but the torture he inflicts on her is at times more than I can bear, and I almost wish he was dead. When I think of Mina's future, I do sincerely wish that she could die! She was very ill a year ago, and I then hoped she would die. She, too, hoped to die; but God has turned his face from my sister and me, and He will not give us death because we want it. I tell you, friend," continued the Crown Prince bitterly, "I am doomed to die, unless by good fortune the King dies first, and Mina is doomed to live!"

BESIDE the path on which the Crown Prince and Henry were walking was a high, closed board fence, on the other side of which Henry fancied he heard footfalls. Twice he looked back to see if the man he had noticed was following; but the fellow had disappeared. When the Crown Prince expressed his wish that his father might die, Fritz Henry's mind reverted to the supposed spy, and he turned with more attention than he had before given to the sounds of footsteps on the other side of the fence.

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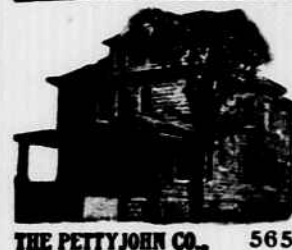
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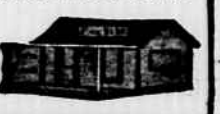
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